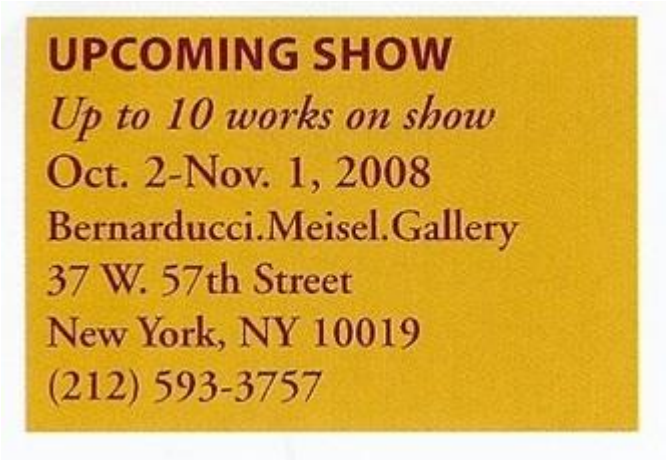
# RICHARD MCLEAN

## First Generation

## Bernarducci Meisel Gallery
## 2008




The Gallery Says . . .

Richard McLean is undoubtedly the leading painter of the horse in contemporary art, and his works are actually unique when compared with those of the illustrators and horse portrait painters in the history of American art.

A first-generation photorealist, Richard McLean spent the 1960s shaking off his roots in abstraction expressionism, Pop Art and the Bay Area Figurative Movement to help usher in a new style of art based on photographs and magazine images.

*"When I started out in the early '60s, I was a devotee of abstract expressionism and Diebenkorn and saw myself as more of an action painter but with figurative tendencies," says McLean. "I knew that I had to get out of that somehow as I was parroting things that had already been done and done better, to be honest."*

When Pop Art started making itself known, McLean saw in it an art movement that legitimized subject matter again and made it OK to paint objects once more. And, like the first Pop artists, McLean also started pieces based on photographs from magazines.

*"I had a more painterly approach than them but I wasn't totally out of sync with early Pop painters as well as artists like Johns and Rauschenberg who started incorporating magazine and book reproductions in their work," says McLean. "I was trying to mottle my way out of my early influences of the 1950s and, by the end of the decade, I was a full-blown photorealist."*

But one of the questions that stayed in his mind throughout this process was that if he was to continue as a painter of objects, what would he paint? He grew up in a rural area in south central Idaho around horses, sheep, cattle, harvested alfalfa and wheat, so animals had always interested him. But, after painting animals for several years, he came upon the horse.

*"In 1967, I painted my first horse painting," says McLean. "A colleague of mine had a horse in Marin County and he would saddle up and ride around. I had him casually sitting in the saddle on the horse and then faked a background that I had taken out of National Geographic. His last name was Ihle, so I called it Ihle Country, like Marlboro Country. And that is when it began to occur to me that I maybe could do something with this subject matter."*

One of the ideas that interested McLean about painting the horse was that up until the end of the 19th century, it had been such a strong symbol in art history as well as culture. But the 20th century had seemed to lose an earlier fascination with the animal.

*"We are all aware of horses and their place in the history of western art and the culture of the West, where I had grown up and was living," says McLean. "The horse has been a dominant feature right up until the end of the 19th century, but in the 20th century, I couldn't think of anyone who might have dealt with a horse as a theme. The horse had been made obsolete by 20th-century technology and it isn't needed anymore for its original purposes—as an instrument of war, transportation or sport."*

This idea of the horse as an obsolete remnant of a past Agrarian culture is also something that became a point of interest for McLean. But, for McLean, such a symbol of a lost way of life is visually important for a number of reasons.

*"DH Lawrence once said that man has lost the horse and now man is lost," says McLean. "What Lawrence was doing was lamenting the horse as a symbol of nature in the broader sense and that technology has served to separate us from nature."*

So, McLean sought to find ways to show how horses had reintegrated themselves into 20th-century life and this is one of the themes of these paintings.

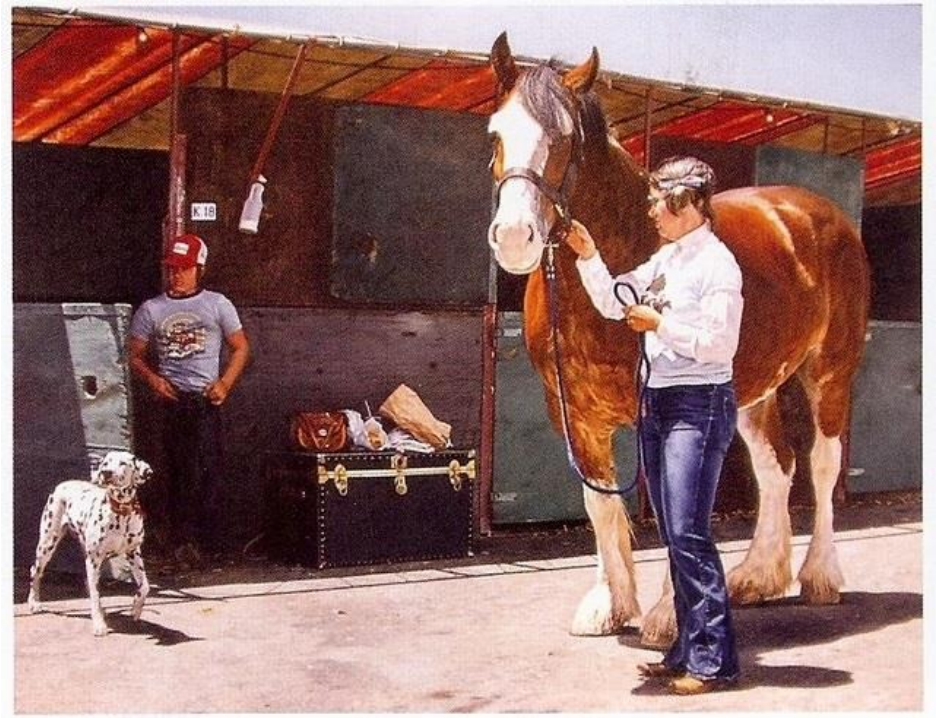
*"The horse has become a kind of recreational symbol now," says McLean. "It has no practical function in our lives anymore. It has become an emblem, in a sense, reduced to a hood ornament in the 20th century. But, it still retains this mythology and symbolism."*

McLean, instead, wanted to create images of the horse that paid homage to these early themes but didn't get caught up in nostalgia, sentimentality or affection. He wanted to deal with the hone as more of a visual element.

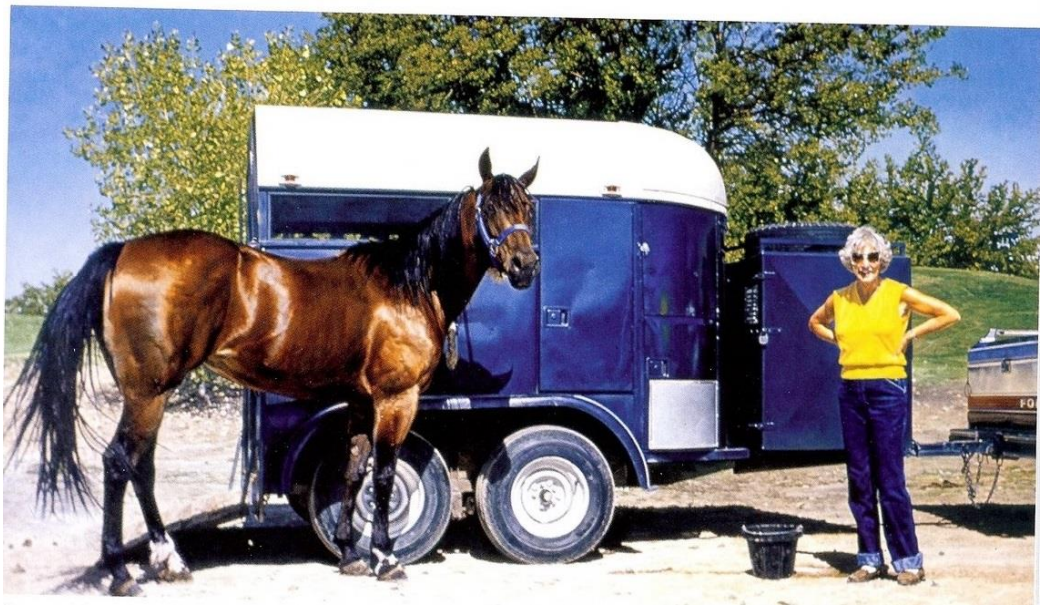
*"I wanted to treat the horse like a still life object," says McLean. "I want to objectify rather than subjectify the horse and make it more of a statement of appearances. The real challenge for me is to know how to paint the horse yet again and not pack it with all the baggage that it carried over the centuries. I want to paint it as an object among objects, catching the light, reflecting the light, like you would a still life and other objects."*

Western Tableau with Rhodesian Ridgeback (Trails West), 1993, Oil on Linen, 48 x 70"

Diamond Tinker and Jet Chex, Oil on Canvas, 1977, 56 x 63"



Standing Figures with Bag Lunch, Oil on Canvas, 1980, 43 x 56"



Veronica's Shanghai Duchess, Oil on Linen, 1993, 48 x 86"